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THE STRENGTH TO CARRY ON – RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY TO TRAFFICKING ON MIGRATION ROUTES TO EUROPE

by Claire Healy

The study *The Strength to Carry On: Resilience and Vulnerability to Trafficking and Other Abuses among People Travelling along Migration Routes to Europe* covers the **Eastern Mediterranean, Balkan and Central Mediterranean migration routes**. The research found indications of **trafficking for sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and forced migrant smuggling, as well as deprivation of liberty for extortion**. Few of these trafficking cases are identified by the authorities.

Resilience to trafficking and other abuses is driven by **higher levels of education, financial resources and access to information, as well as possibilities for regular travel and transit, and access to services**. However, this resilience may be compromised by factors of vulnerability such as **children travelling alone, experiences of trauma, violence and abuse, obstacles to accessing services and interactions with migrant smugglers**.

This Policy Brief provides an overview of the key findings and recommendations of *The Strength to Carry On*. The full study and short briefing paper can be downloaded at: www.icmpd.org.

Resilience in the context of the migration journey
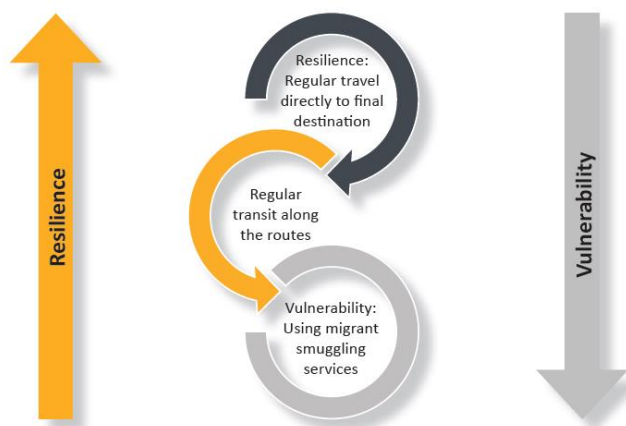
About the Research

The Strength to Carry On is the main outcome of the research project 'Study on Trafficking Resilience and Vulnerability *en route* to Europe (STRIVE)' funded by the US Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (J/TIP) and implemented by ICMPD. 91 people on the move and 245 key informants – organisations and institutions working directly with people on the move - were interviewed during 2018 in the countries under study: Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Germany and Italy.

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Personal characteristics are not in themselves sources of resilience or vulnerability to trafficking, but the migration context affects people differently. Specific measures should be implemented to address the vulnerabilities of women and girls, as well as men and boys.

A person's general financial situation, level of education, qualifications and literacy skills are determining factors for resilience, as well as risk awareness and life experience. Access to essential information **reduces reliance on migrant smugglers and other illicit actors**.

Men and boys are generally considered more resilient than women and girls, even though they are also exposed to specific vulnerabilities. In some cases, the presumption of their resilience may in fact exacerbate their vulnerabilities. This creates a **paradox of 'vulnerable groups'**, whereby people considered the most vulnerable tend to have better access to services *en route* and in destination contexts, while **people not considered vulnerable are actually rendered more vulnerable due to lack of access**.

2. Positive experiences of migrant smuggling keep people resilient, but using smuggling services can also make them vulnerable to trafficking. Alternatives for regular travel and legalised transit along the routes reduce vulnerability.

Because of the lack of legal channels for migrating and seeking asylum, and of possibilities to transit regularly, **almost everyone who travels the routes uses migrant smugglers**, at least at some point. Using smugglers constitutes resilience if they carry out their task, and vulnerability if it leads to exploitation. Many trafficking cases identified by the research were **connected to smuggling situations**, either because people needed to pay for smuggling, or because those providing migrant smuggling services directly exploited the service-users.

3. Resilience and vulnerability are determined by migration policies and practices. People should be treated with dignity at borders, the safety of sea crossings should be improved, and human and child rights must be respected.

The study showed that when regular travel by plane, train or road is not permitted, the circumstances of travel are a determining factor of people's experiences. A key driver of resilience to trafficking and abuse is **the possibility to travel regularly by plane, with an entry visa for an EU country**.

In the absence of options for regular air travel, **regular travel by sea and/or overland is the next best source of resilience**. This possibility was available to many, at least for some sections of the trip from Greece to Germany and other EU countries, during 2015 - March 2016. This contrasts with the vulnerabilities to trafficking and other abuses of people who travelled since then.

"What makes you vulnerable in your country of origin or along the route is, in essence, the thing that helps you when you arrive in Greece."
- Interviewee from an NGO in Greece

"[Smugglers] are good. It depends, if your smuggler is good, you will be good. If your smuggler is not good, you won't be good."
- 23-year-old Pakistani man interviewed in Serbia

Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan routes

The restrictions on movement that have been progressively imposed by European countries since 2016 significantly increased the vulnerabilities of people using the routes. Even if, logically, people wish to travel as cheaply and safely as possible, **changing policies and restrictive laws and measures leave them with few options other than a costly, long and dangerous journey**.

Other issues that contributed to people's vulnerability when crossing borders within Europe include reports of deferred refusals of entry in Italy, and reports of human rights abuses and illegal returns ('pushbacks') in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary.

4. Working informally has implications for resilience and vulnerability. <u>People in transit and at destination should have access to vocational training and decent employment. People on the move should be provided with accurate information about their situation and their options.</u>

People often work for some time in transit countries, like Libya, Turkey and Greece, in order to earn enough to continue their journey and/or to send money to their families. Because they generally do not have authorisation to work, they are **vulnerable to labour exploitation**.

Throughout the journey, **digital and computer literacy allow people to access information through social media and other online sources**, also representing an important alternative source of information other than information provided by migrant smugglers, and constituting a factor of resilience.

"The world has to know what happened to us. We tried to cross the border 6 times and the police caught us 5 times. They didn't just beat us, they took everything, money and mobiles, everything." **18-year-old Afghan man interviewed in Hungary**

"Oh, we would be so happy if somebody would try to exploit us. But there is nobody. Even if we had to work for 7 days a week and get paid for 1 day, we would happily do it." **- Nigerian man interviewed in Germany**

5. Resilience can be boosted by providing access to a regular immigration status, and timely and fair asylum procedures.

Particularly for people who manage to reach their intended destination country, arrival is itself a form of resilience, as it means the end of a risky journey and the **prospect of legal status, employment and social inclusion**. Timely access to a fair asylum procedure on arrival, or to other alternatives for regularisation of their status, maintains people's resilience to trafficking.
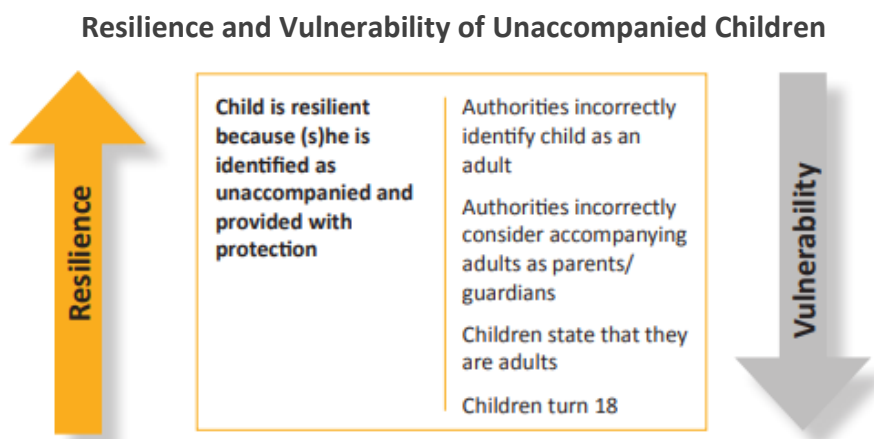
6. Access to essential services like safety, accommodation, education and physical and mental healthcare makes people resilient to trafficking. Measures must be in place to make sure that traffickers are not residing at accommodation centres, or using centres to recruit victims.

Effective access to **adequate, safe accommodation**, both along the route and in a destination context, is a key factor of resilience. However, in certain cases conditions at official accommodation centres make people residing there feel unsafe and at risk, and there are reports of smugglers and traffickers residing at centres in order to recruit service-users or victims.

When people are accommodated in closed centres, under conditions of detention and with restricted access to essential services and to timely and fair asylum procedures, **they suffer trauma and lose trust in authorities**, all of which makes them more vulnerable to trafficking and other abuses.

Access to **education** is one of the most important resilience factors to human trafficking for children. Access to appropriate care for **mental and physical health** also makes people more resilient.

"One of the main smugglers from Pakistan, his brother was in the camp. They were recruiting people from the camp who wanted to cross the northern border illegally. They introduced themselves as refugees and moved together with the refugees."
-Key informant in North Macedonia

7. Groups of people on the move should be assessed to determine family relationships and identify potential abuses. Unaccompanied children must be appropriately identified and provided with specialised services in order to remain resilient, especially during their transition to adulthood.

Resilience and Vulnerability of Unaccompanied Children

Resilience (upward arrow)

Child is resilient because (s)he is identified as unaccompanied and provided with protection

Authorities incorrectly identify child as an adult

Authorities incorrectly consider accompanying adults as parents/ guardians

Children state that they are adults

Children turn 18

Vulnerability (downward arrow)

"In Italy we are doing fabulous things for unaccompanied children, but what happens when they turn 18? [...] It's as if an Egyptian boy becomes invulnerable on the exact day he turns 18."
- Interviewee from an NGO in Italy

If **unaccompanied and separated children are correctly identified** by the authorities of the country they are in, they can be provided with the specialised services that they are entitled to (legal guardian, specialised accommodation) and are far more resilient to exploitation and abuse.

The resilience of many unaccompanied children, even if they are correctly identified, is compromised by a **lack of trained guardians** with the capacity to care for these children, and who are appointed as swiftly as possible. **Children who are about to turn 18** need particular care, and should benefit from a transition phase of specialised services while they are young adults.

8. The capacities of asylum authorities to identify trafficked people among asylum applicants should be strengthened. To encourage people to report cases, the authorities should build trust, fight anti-migrant sentiments and mitigate isolation of these communities.

Official identification of trafficking cases in the countries under study among people travelling the routes is limited, and unlikely to reflect the actual prevalence. The research did not seek to identify confirmed trafficking cases, as this can only be carried out by the responsible authorities. Instead, the study offers evidence-based indications of potential trafficking in the context of migration routes during 2015-2018, to inform actions and follow-up measures. Specific details about **69 potential trafficking cases** were identified in the course of the research, and 14 cases of deprivation of liberty for extortion. 42 potential trafficking cases involved men and boys and 27 involved women and girls. **A minority of these cases were officially identified by the authorities**.

9. People on the move are trafficked for sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and forced migrant smuggling. Special measures for people on the move should be incorporated into trafficking screening, identification, referral, protection and prosecution mechanisms. Non-punishment provisions should apply to people on the move who have been trafficked.

Sex trafficking of women and girls is prevalent in this context, but men and boys are also affected. Pakistani and Afghan boys are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking, including in the context of *bacha bāzī* (a form of child sexual exploitation). Men and boys are also trafficked for **forced labour in agriculture, textiles, the services industry, construction and begging**. Apart from sex and labour trafficking, the main form of trafficking among people who travel the routes is **forced criminal activities**, particularly migrant smuggling.

10. People deprived of their liberty for extortion should be protected as victims, and perpetrators should be brought to justice.

There is a debate at international policy level as to whether deprivation of

"At disembarkation there is no time, they are too many people in the centres, [...] there is no moment when they can be properly informed [....]. The absence of information makes them increasingly vulnerable because they can lose trust in the social workers."
- Interviewee from an NGO in Italy

"Migrants who were kept in the houses in Turkey were ordered to commit property crimes, home break-ins or robberies, and when they refused they were beaten severely."
- Anon. migrant interviewed in North Macedonia

liberty for extortion - also referred to as 'kidnapping' - should be considered human trafficking. The research presents the *modus operandi* **of perpetrators and the experiences of victims**, and shows that **extortion involves the abuse of a person's rights in order to obtain financial or material benefits**.

**11. Human trafficking takes place in the context of migrant smuggling.
Migrant smuggling cases should be investigated for indications of trafficking.**

The main *modus operandi* of traffickers, regardless of whether or not they also provide migrant smuggling services, is abusing people's position of vulnerability. **This vulnerability arises from their need to use, and to pay for, migrant smuggling**, due to the lack of alternatives for regular travel.

The Way Forward

To **prevent human trafficking**, the focus should be on how people can remain resilient to trafficking and other abuses, and on mitigating vulnerabilities and exposure to dangers. These recommendations should be implemented in order to address the urgent need to respond to human trafficking, to resilience and vulnerability to trafficking, and to the protection of the rights of adults and children on the move, contributing to **overall stability, security and rule of law** in the countries under study and the wider region.

The implementation of some of the recommendations is in line with a general consensus about the rights of people on the move among policy-makers, practitioners and the people themselves, while other recommendations **require significant advocacy and political will** in order to become a reality. The intention of this study is **contribute on both fronts to an improvement in the situation** portrayed by the research findings of *The Strength to Carry On*.

"The first time I travelled to Bulgaria, I met another Bangladeshi guy. He said he would help me. He was mafia [a smuggler]. He took me into his house, took my passport, and left me without food for four days."
- Bangladeshi man interviewed in Serbia

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